

# Teaching the Speaking Skill to Japanese Students Part1 : Construct & Practice

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# **TEACHING THE SPEAKING SKILL TO JAPANESE STUDENTS PART 1: CONSTRUCT & PRACTICE**

Alun E.M. ROGER

## **ABSTRACT**

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Despite studying English from around the age of twelve, the Japanese have the lowest oral English proficiency in Asia. This paper identifies the reasons behind this underperformance and lays the foundations of an English speaking skills course for Japanese high school students that will contribute to raising their overall speaking ability. A second future paper will expose a dichotomy in the Japanese EFL community on the way English language education is provided in the public and private sectors and propose a solution – a hybrid Skills & Task based oral communication course.

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

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Japan, as a member of the G8, is a leading economic power. English is the language of international communication, business and science and is therefore of significant value to the Japanese. In order for Japan to maintain its status as a key global player and continue to trade as an economic leader, it must cultivate a population that is competent in *all* areas of the English language.

Indeed, since Japan's spiralling economic downturn throughout the 1990's coupled with the explosive industrialisation of China perhaps EFL has never been of such paramount importance.

Despite Japanese school students beginning their English language education in elementary school and despite the proliferation and popularity of private English conversation (*Eikaiwa*) schools across Japan, the Japanese have the lowest oral proficiency rating in Asia (Takanashi 2004) (LoCastro 1996).

The ultimate aim of this series of two papers is to produce a general English speaking skills course for 1<sup>st</sup> year Japanese high school students. It is intended that this new course will address students' oral communication needs more so than existing English courses on offer in Japan and contribute to raising the overall level of high school students' oral proficiency and competence.

This first paper opens by defining the meaning of the term 'speaking'. In selecting relevant teaching objectives for the course, it is necessary to describe and define, by means of a construct, the nature of the speaking skill. The paper then moves on to address teaching approaches. Evaluating the pros and cons of possible teaching approaches should help determine how best to teach the construct identified. An examination of the Japanese teaching and learning culture follows. Identifying the existing educational norms and practices is important in assessing teaching approach suitability to a Japanese context. The examination will also highlight any modifications that may be necessary to make those approaches more compatible with Japanese learners of English.

## **2 IDENTIFYING KEY ELEMENTS FOR A SPEAKING SKILL CONSTRUCT**

This section identifies the key elements necessary for competent English speaking. These elements will form part of a Speaking Construct that will help to provide clear aims and objectives for each unit, task or activity.

### **2.1 Nature and Characteristics of Spoken English**

Competent speakers of English must understand that the nature and characteristics of spoken English differ from those of the written form. McCarthy and O’Keeffe (2004), Bygate (2001), Cameron (2001) and Collins and Hollo (2000) all conclude that spoken English differs from written English in its grammar, syntax, lexis and discourse patterns. These differences are due to the nature of spoken language.

Spoken English is context bound, the interlocutors sharing the immediate context within which the dialogue takes place; hence much information is implicit and assumed (Collins and Hollo 2000) (McCarthy 1998) (Carter and McCarthy 1995). In contrast, written English is context free and as such information in written texts must be made explicit via longer and more complex sentences. Spoken English contains simpler utterances with more context related features because the omitted information is easily retrieved from the immediate environment – an advantage not readily available to written texts which are removed from their context spatially, and/or temporally (Ur 1998) (McCarthy and Carter 1995) (Bygate 2001).

Conversations are negotiative, interpersonal and constantly changing (Collins and Hollo 2000) (McCarthy and Carter 1998). Spoken English makes frequent use of the vernacular, interrogatives, tails, adjacency pairs and question tags which Cameron (2001) and Carter et al (2000) interpret as dialogue facilitators. These features offer interlocutors opportunities to develop the dialogue, in a context where meanings are subject to negotiation and renegotiation. Conversely, written English tends to be descriptive, static and less reciprocal and frequently lacks the dialogue facilitating features mentioned above (Collins and Hollo 2000) (Carter and Nunan 2001).

Spoken English is created ‘on the fly’ as a conversation unfolds. Short-term memory cannot process and then retain whole dialogues at the beginning of an utterance (Collins and Hollo 2000) (McCarthy 1998) (Cameron 2001) (Bygate 1998). Therefore, spoken English commonly contains reduced grammatical structures arranged into clausal ‘chunks’ or utterances. Indeed McCarthy and O’Keeffe (2004) and Hunston (2002) suggest that in fact many of these chunks are actually prefabricated formulaic sequences that are learnt and stored holistically in a native English speaker’s memory. These formulaic chunks can then be retrieved and used immediately during spontaneous instances of dialogue – further reducing strain on short-term memory processes. On the other hand, written texts often exhibit complex, varied and cohesive sentences and fluent logical arguments (Schmitt 2002) (McCarthy 1998). Spoken English also contains features such as dysfluencies and discourse markers that further help to manage the processing load during conversations.

A learner’s speaking competence is determined by his success in conducting

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a conversation (Bygate 2001) (Bygate 1998). Success in conversation is more likely if the grammar, syntax, lexis and discourse patterns used are familiar to, accurate and appropriate for all the interlocutors. Learners should be aware that communication in written and spoken form is different and these differences are important elements that affect competent English speaking.

### **2.2 Situations and Genres**

McCarthy and O’Keeffe (2004), Bygate (1998), Richards (1994) and Schmitt (2002) all identify that discourse can be compartmentalised into a number of speaking environments. Successful English speakers should be able to operate in many of these situations or genres.

Conversations tend to be either interactive or transactional. The function of interactional dialogues is to establish and maintain social bonds between interlocutors (Hedge 2004) (Shumin 1997) (Richards 1994). The function of transactional dialogues is to complete a task and/or exchange information. There is a purpose other than merely reinforcing social ties.

Conversations within these situations can be further categorised into genres that account for the different forms and parameters of the interaction (Hedge 2004) (Schmitt 2002) (O’Grady 1997). Examples of interactive genres might be: a casual conversation with a stranger at a bus stop or a casual conversation with a friend in the pub. While the aim is the same (establishing social ties), the dialogue patterns are different. A casual conversation with a stranger is likely to employ fewer disagreement utterances than a similar dialogue

with a friend for example. Casual dialogues between friends might see more utterance overlaps or ‘turn-stealing’ interruptions. Examples of transactional genres might be: an after dinner speech or a service-encounter. Again the situation remains the same (the exchange of information for purpose) yet the methods employed differ. An after dinner speech is monologic whereas service-encounters tend to use adjacent pairing (Collins and Hollo 2000) (Dornyei and Thurrell 1994).

Learners of English should be knowledgeable and fluent in all future Target Language Use domain (TLU) situations and genres they are likely to encounter if they are to be considered truly competent speakers. Each genre uses different arrangements and frequencies of Spontaneous Spoken Language (SSL) features (Bygate 1998) (McCarthy 1998). Speaking is not merely the ability to form correct grammatical utterances. An ability to apply the appropriate features in the right genre is also critical to communicative success and performance.

### **2.3 Skills and Sub-skills**

The macro skill of speaking is an association of smaller fluency sub-skills (McCarthy and O’Keeffe 2004) (Fulcher 2003) (O’Sullivan et al 2002) (Dornyei and Thurrell 1994) (McCarthy 1998) (Richards 1994) (Hedge 2004). A solid grasp of all the sub-skills is necessary for full English speaking competency. These sub-skills will now be considered.

Native English speakers have various coping strategies that allow them

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to bypass communicative ‘trouble spots’ in dialogues (Dornyei and Thurrell 1994) (Hedge 2004) (Fulcher 2003). By learning coping strategies (e.g. paraphrasing, reduction, word coinage etc.) non-native speakers can contribute to a conversation within the bounds of their ability. Coping strategies provide learners with alternative routes to achieving a language goal that might otherwise be beyond their language capacity. Coping strategies can help learners be more confident with a language; a confident learner is more likely to be communicative and interact with fellow interlocutors.

Competent English speakers also display an ability to negotiate meaning (O’Sullivan et al 2002) (Nunan 1991) (Hedge 2004) (Dornyei and Thurrell 1994). Conversation often requires phases of negotiation and re-negotiation as interlocutors attempt to make their intentions or meanings clear. Learners lack the full repertoire of *negotiative functions* and strategies that native English speakers possess and consequently might find themselves in dialogues where their meanings/intentions are unclear. O’Sullivan et al. (2002), Dornyei and Thurrell (1994) and Hedge (2004) therefore call for speaking syllabi to include *negotiative functions* like clarification requests, expressing opinions, making requests/suggestions, expressing reactions to others utterances as well as including input on *indirect speech acts* (e.g. “I wonder if you could...”-intended as a request). The early exposure of learners to functions that allow the effective communication of meaning and provide learners with a way to check that others have understood their message goes some way to producing more competent speakers of English.

Learners of English need help in figuring out the rules and routines



specific to English dialogues, therefore interaction management is another key skill that learners would do well to acquire (Fulcher 2003) (O'Sullivan et al 2002) (Bygate 1998) (Dornyei and Thurrell 1994) (Nunan 1991). A study by McCarthy and O'Keeffe (2004) has shown that much classroom conversation involves the teacher taking the role of initiator, yet knowing how and when to open a conversation is a key speaking competence that learners must be taught. Turn-taking and adjacency pair practice will provide learners with indispensable knowledge of when it is appropriate to talk, for how long and the preferred response pattern to adopt. These issues are evidently important when considering interlocutors may be employing different cultural turn-taking conventions that could lead to breakdowns in the dialogue, miscommunications or even perceptions of rudeness. Furthermore, closings in English are highly ritualised, and there is in existence a whole raft of pre-closing and closing formulae that native English speakers use to shut down a conversation gradually to avoid appearing rude (Dornyei and Thurrell 1994). An ability to close dialogues down in a culturally acceptable way would be another important aspect of competent management of interaction.

Discourse management is another key sub-skill learners should acquire (Cameron 2001) (Fulcher 2003) (Hedge 2004) (Carter et al 2000) (McCarthy and Carter 1995). Interlocutors involved in dialogues communicate via clause-like utterances or 'chunks' that can seem disorganised and inexplicit (Collins and Hollo 2000) (McCarthy 1998) (Carter and McCarthy 1995). Learners with ability to use discourse facilitators will be able to enhance the digestion and management of clausal utterances, making dialogues more coherent for fellow interlocutors.

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Dornyei and Thurrell (1994) and Hedge (2004) remark as to why the acquisition of the above sub-skills is so important to becoming a competent second language speaker. A knowledge of grammar and vocabulary will not allow someone to communicate effectively. Conversation is not just about saying something grammatically correct, it is a social activity and has a multitude of social rules. For example, small talk at a bus stop about inconsequential topics such as the weather is not necessarily about conveying important grammatically/syntactically correct information. Rather, small talk is more a process of social communion that adds a further layer of rules to the language over and above those dictated by the grammar. Indeed the genre of small talk may in fact dictate the suitability or frequency of certain grammatical structures that can be used in a given small-talk encounter. Without an understanding of how to apply or when to use certain grammatical structures or vocabulary, learners will be misunderstood or misinterpreted – and hence lack competence.

### **3 THE PRACTICE OF TEACHING SPEAKING SKILLS**

With an idea of ‘what to teach’ we must now turn our attention to ‘how to teach the skills appropriately’. Any suitable pedagogy will A) effectively communicate to learners the desired skills, and B) meet learner needs and expectations. Therefore, this section will also review the current English language teaching and learning environment in Japan in order to identify possible implications for a speaking skill course pedagogy.

Current literature (Hedge 2004) (Schmitt 2002) (Dornyei and Thurrell 1994)

(Richards 1994) indicates that, at present, there are two chief approaches to the teaching of speaking – Indirect and Direct. These approaches (and their associated methodologies) are discussed below.

### **3.1 Indirect Approach**

The Indirect approach interprets speaking competence as: -

“...the product of engaging learners in conversational interaction.”

(Richards 1994:76-77)

Put simply, learners are given practice at the elements of the speaking skill via their participation in communicative activities. The Indirect approach is based on a notion laid out by Krashen and SLA theorists (Schmitt 2002) which states that languages can be unconsciously acquired through conversation and exposure to ‘comprehensible input’. The Indirect approach states that explicit or direct focus on form is unimportant because children learning their first language (L1) receive no such input, yet they eventually become competent users of language (Dornyei and Thurrell 1994) (Hedge 2004) (Richards 1994). Pedagogically, classes where the Indirect approach is emphasised tend to provide lots of opportunities for student-student interaction with an aim to completing a task; rather than seeing the language as the aim, it becomes the means to an end. Methodologies such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) evolved from this approach (Schmitt 2002) (Richards 1994). Despite helping to shift language learning away from the more rote methodologies the Indirect approach is not without its drawbacks. Critically, it is flawed to some extent in its assumption of

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Krashen's acquisition theory as being as equally valid for second language learning. The L2 learning process is not identical to the L1 learning process, and learners of a second language do need and indeed benefit from some overt explicit teaching of the language (O'Grady 1997) (Skehan 1996) (Long 2000). Indeed Richards (1994) notes that the indirect approach fails to address other areas of competent speaking such as accuracy or sociolinguistic appropriacy. Furthermore, Task-based learning (TBLT) in particular (and the indirect approach more broadly) often provides practice with transactional language, while opportunities to produce interactional language are minimised due to activity types utilised in such classes (ibid). A fluent, articulate speaker capable of quickly formulating utterances, but whose sentences are inaccurate and inappropriate is just as likely to be unintelligible as a speaker who is highly accurate and appropriate, yet slow and inarticulate. Accuracy and sociolinguistic elements are equally important goals for a speaking skills course. Perhaps, as a final note on drawbacks, it would appear that the fundamental principles of learning championed by the Indirect approach and its offspring methodologies are more or less counter to those held within the Japanese teaching and learning culture. This is a significant issue and will be discussed in more depth later in this paper.

### **3.2 Direct Approach**

Advocates of the Direct Approach argue that speaking skills can and should be taught explicitly via consciousness raising activities (Hedge 2004) (McCarthy and O'Keeffe 2004) (Dornyei and Thurrell 1994) (Richards 1994). The Direct approach raises learners' awareness of the nature, systems and patterns involved in conversations via specific language input (Dornyei and

Thurrell 1994). Learners gain knowledge on how to use the fixed expressions, micro-skills, set phrases and discourse markers that are so abundant in spoken discourse.

However, McCarthy and O’Keeffe (2004), Carter and McCarthy (1995) and Dornyei and Thurrell (1994) argue - possibly wrongly - that speaking skills should be taught explicitly because of the way they interpret communicative competence; as mostly about *knowing how to use* conversational rules and patterns. Knowing how to do something and actually having the cognitive pathways and functions to do it automatically are two separate, but equally important aspects of communicative competence. Perhaps there is a danger of the pendulum swinging too far. An awareness or knowledge of the elements of speaking still requires learners to consciously control the use of such language. The Direct approach fails to account for the need to shift some of the knowledge to a stage where it can be acquired and automatically processed. The limitations of the human mental processing capacity mean that in stressful or complex environments the controlled processing of language elements may lead to more speaking errors and hence lower speaking competence. Perhaps a balance of explicit awareness raising techniques and indirect/implicit based practice methods will provide a fairer, more even approach to producing competent Japanese speakers of English.

A mixture of Indirect and Direct approaches and even methodologies is at present the most suitable way of teaching the speaking skill, at least to western learners. The next major hurdle to consider is whether these approaches and methodologies are suitable for use in a Japanese learning

environment, or whether some modification to these approaches/pedagogies might be necessary.

### **3.3 The Japanese Learning Pedagogy Vs. Direct/Indirect language teaching: Compatibility Analysis**

CLT/TBLT aims differ from those of the current language pedagogies in Japan. McKay (2002), Stapleton (2000), LoCastro (1996) and Ellis (1996) all argue that CLT/TBLT impose a western hierarchy of language learning goals and values upon foreign EFL programs, values which might not necessarily be shared. Indeed this certainly seems to be the case in Japan where mainstream language education is geared toward passing examinations, even at university level (Yoneyama 1999) (Stapleton 2000) (LoCastro 1996) (Takanashi 2004). Consequently, Japanese mainstream language education focuses on grammar, reading and writing. Communicative competence is perceived as having lesser relevance because it does not form part of many exams and will have little influence in helping students to pass an exam system based on grammar-translation notions. This opinion is beginning to change slowly however. A recent 'Action Plan' (Butler and Iino 2005) released by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Technology (MEXT) recognises the importance of oral competence and the limitations of current '*Juken eigo*' (English for exam purposes) and has initiated a change toward offering students more 'practical communicative skills' by introducing a listening test into university entrance exams from 2006 onwards. The plan also provides for the inclusion of more communicatively based tests such as TOEFL and Cambridge ESOL in the university entrance exam - although a timeline for implementation appears not to be provided. Furthermore the plan also calls

for a re-evaluation of current language teaching pedagogy, with a goal of one-third of language classes to be taught by native speaking teachers. Clearly, then, communicative competence and alternative pedagogies are likely to start taking more prominent roles in High School language programs and so in light of this CLT/TBLT might not seem so inappropriate as first appears.

Japanese teachers and students make frequent use of Japanese during English lessons, and this too flies in the face of Indirect/Communicative approach principles (LoCastro 1996) (Yoneyama 1999). The heavy emphasis on grammar translation and language forms reduces the amount of time available for communicative practice (Yoneyama 1999) (LoCastro 1996) (Furuhata 1999) (Takanashi 2004). Consequently, teachers (who are themselves products of the Japanese teaching and learning culture) are not required to be proficient English speakers. Indeed the Japanese teaching culture argues that English grammar/forms and class activities can be explained better and in more depth by teachers using Japanese (Harmer 1994) (LoCastro 1996). As mentioned above, oral competence is not as valued in the Japanese education culture because it is not a requirement of the university entrance exams; the washback effect of this is that the Japanese linguistic educational community views an English oral ability as less essential (Butler and Iino 2005) (Sato and Kleinsasser 1999) (Takanashi 2004). Finally, by speaking in Japanese teachers can avoid losing face if they make a mistake when speaking English and thus maintain the strict senior-junior hierarchy of Japanese learning culture. Conversely, explicit or direct approaches might seem more suitable in these cases as explanations of form, genre or interaction patterns could quite comfortably be provided in Japanese – ensuring maximum awareness of lesson targets.

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Where Indirect approaches and Direct awareness raising encourage a learner-centred pedagogy, Japanese teaching pedagogy dictates a teacher-centred approach. Students are dependent upon the teacher showing them the ‘correct forms’ and language knowledge they need to memorise in order to pass the university entrance exam. Mobilising their own language resources for independent learning will be fruitless, it is argued, because students will merely be making guesses at the ‘correct’ answer. The ‘true’ answer is something only the teacher can give because he has already acquired that particular information (Yoneyama 1999). Furthermore, learner-centred classes could risk destroying Japanese group harmony. Students in such classes would remain silent; they might feel too embarrassed in case they gave the wrong answer in front of lower status students (Swan and Smith 1987) (Kramsch and Sullivan 1996).

“The nail that sticks up out of the wood is soon hammered down.”

(Japanese proverb)

In Japan, the teaching and learning culture strives for conformity among its students as the proverb above exemplifies. Where CLT/TBLT seeks to encourage learner individualism and self-expression, the Japanese educational culture discourages it (Yoneyama 1999) (Furuhata 1999). In Japan, importance is placed upon maintaining group harmony; students who voice their own opinions risk being different from their classmates/teacher. Students perceived as different have the potential to cause group fracturing (Yoneyama 1999). Furthermore, class time is seen as ‘group time’ and not something to be used to pursue personal learning goals. In Japan, voicing your own opinion is interpreted as selfishness and something that reduces learning time for other



members of the group (LoCastro 1996) (Yoneyama 1999). Problems might arise in Task based classes particularly where language focus is left to student preference, and the teacher merely reacts to errors and questions noticed by the students.

It is perhaps useful to summarise at this point that Indirect approaches and methodologies like CLT or TBLT are at odds with the Japanese teaching and learning culture. They are western approaches designed for learners with western learning goals, values and expectations. The Japanese learning culture has its own quite different, but equally valid goals, values and expectations. These aims are not based around sociolinguistic, strategic or discourse competencies defined by the Indirect approach. It is important to remember that, for the vast majority of Japanese students studying English, the primary aim is to pass a grammar/form based university exam, not to be able to converse with native English speakers. Japan, for economic and geographic reasons is still quite isolated from foreign cultures, particularly English speaking ones, and so many Japanese have no need for the communicative English competencies CLT/TBLT promote.

Despite these apparent incompatibilities the recent reforms introduced by MEXT (Butler and Iino 2005) mean that Japanese educational goals are being adjusted to deal with the low communicative competence and as a consequence are beginning to overlap with those of the West. The MEXT action plan also states a clear goal for increased interaction with Western educational contexts. The action plan aims to get 10,000 high school students to study abroad in English speaking countries every year. It is clear then that oral communication skills will become critical for all high school students in

order for these targets are to be met. It could be argued that Japanese students need to be aware of native western models and values of communication if they are to successfully communicate abroad. Therefore, should not these students, at least to some extent, be exposed to such learning environments if only to prepare them for the native English teaching and learning cultures they are likely to encounter? Perhaps as a backlash against Indirect methods being seen as the holy grail of ELT, linguists were too quick to demonise all aspects of such pedagogies.

### **3.4 Obstacles to implementing Direct/CLT/TBLT approaches in the Japanese learning environment**

This section examines the key tasks, activities and procedures characteristic of explicit awareness raising/CLT/TBLT and the challenges in implementing them within the Japanese learning environment. It goes on to propose modifications that make these activities more compatible with the Japanese learning culture.

Certain task types (in particular problem solving and free discussion tasks) most typical of CLT/TBLT classes can be problematic for Japanese learners and may require some modification. Firstly they are open-ended. The teacher is not leading or providing direction for the learners. Japanese students, unused to this level of ‘free’ discussion feel unsure of how to proceed and consequently remain quiet. Japanese learning culture dictates that there is one correct ‘learning path’ or solution that the teacher must explain to the students – but in these activities the ‘solutions’ might not be clear-cut or even provided. Students may hesitate to commit to any of the possible survival

solutions for fear that they are incorrect or that individual students are too imposing upon the group. Mistakes may cause individuals to lose face, while making one's own views clear on the 'correct path' might be interpreted as too individualistic, selfish and disruptive to group harmony.

Problem solving tasks might be modified thusly: the teacher provides a number of possible solutions, supplying the students with 'correct paths'. Students then only need to select the appropriate strategies to meet one of the predetermined outcomes set by the teacher. The tasks will still provide the same discourse between students, it is just that the decisions regarding end goals have been predetermined.

Running tasks where the overarching aim is negotiation of meaning (e.g. free discussions/debates) can be met with a wall of silence. There are perhaps three obstacles impeding the effectiveness of these tasks. Firstly, some students are likely to feel too shy to give their own opinions in public for fear of making a mistake or proposing a view contrary to others. Secondly, students may be hesitant to contribute due to the strict 'sempai-kohai' hierarchy in some Japanese groups; speaking out of turn would cause senior students to lose face. Furthermore, senior classmates can tend to dominate these activities because junior students feel compelled to agree with seniors, as they are 'more experienced'. Thirdly, perhaps learners genuinely do not see the activity as a valuable learning exercise. Students may feel that they aren't really learning anything *about* English and that any such discussions could be better solved in their native Japanese language.

Modifying the discussion task learning aims and format will help make this

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type of activity more appropriate for Japanese students of English. Adapting the aim so that the point of the discussion is to review recent vocabulary on the environment or discussion gambits, for example, might provide learners with a more 'concrete' motivation for participating. Adapting the format to a sided debate might help alleviate individual students' inhibitions about voicing their own opinions. A sided debate requires students to assume a role, which according to Swan and Smith (1987) and Kramsch and Sullivan (1996) can help some students feel more comfortable about voicing potentially controversial opinions. Students can dissociate themselves from the opinion more easily because they are merely messengers for the role. Dominant students might be assigned managerial positions within the group whose job it is to collect views from all members and then report these to other groups – allowing junior students to participate in the discussion and also ensuring feedback between groups occurs to maintain class harmony.

Phases of reporting back to the class or presentations/performances in front of the class emphasised in some literature on TBLT cycles Willis (1996) may also encounter resistance in a Japanese learning context. Willis (*ibid*) suggests that after learners have completed a task they then plan and execute a report, presentation or performance of their task or its findings to or in front of the rest of the class. In doing so learners have to practice different registers (formal) and more public, less casual spoken structures and thus are forced to broaden and deepen their communicative resources more so than merely completing the task alone. While this theory may be sound for western learners who are perhaps more comfortable or at least more familiar with this lesson task, for Japanese learners it could potentially be de-motivating and counter productive. Some students may fear making errors and losing face

in front of less senior classmates, others may be reluctant to give out a report for fear of it going against the general conclusions of the class as a whole – a very important consideration in a learning context where class harmony takes precedence over any group or pair loyalties/ties (this issue is discussed in more detail below).

Possible modifications to this element of a TBLT cycle might be to get students to record their report or performance onto video tape/audiotape that would then be evaluated by the teacher and feedback sheets provided for the next session. This technique would help to make students less anxious about disrupting group harmony or voicing their own opinions, and avoids senior students suffering any public embarrassment. However, this may be difficult and time consuming in large classes. Another solution might be to get students to conduct their reports in smaller sub-groups. Smaller subgroups all giving similar presentations/performances at the same time around the room reduces the chance of individuals feeling as though they are going against group opinion and there will be fewer eyes on learners as others are doing the same thing around the room – creating an atmosphere of shared situation rather than pointing the spotlight on one team. Whole class reports and performances should not be totally forgotten; occasionally whole class reports/performances will be desirable. They are a valid and common genre that learners will inevitably encounter later in their academic or working lives; students should be exposed to and prepared for such tasks. Perhaps, instead of a report phase some tasks might actually be repeated ‘for real’ in a semi-authentic environment such as Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) web chat with a native speaker located in an affiliate school. For

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example if the lesson task was to practice turn taking strategies in informal interactional discourse, learners could log on to a dedicated web chat site to use their new language knowledge in a ‘real’ communicative environment. Payne and Whitney (2002) and McCarthy and O’Keeffe (2004) point out that CMC has shown to be beneficial in improving spoken English, as web chat users make use of many features of spoken rather than written language to communicate via this medium.

### **4 CONCLUSION**

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In conclusion, this paper firstly identified key skill sets necessary for learners to become more proficient users of English. The findings are in line with current theories on speaking constructs. Learners need to be aware of and acquire the following linguistic, socio-linguistic and discourse competencies: -

- Knowledge of the nature/characteristics of spoken language
- Knowledge of and ability to use situation and genre specific language and discourse patterns.
- Knowledge of and ability to use fluency skills and sub-skills such as coping strategies, interaction management, negotiation of meaning etc.

A more detailed list of course objectives (or speaking skill Construct) will be created from these more general findings in a subsequent paper on course design.

At present the EFL community perceives CLT/TBLT pedagogies as more effective at achieving what they set out to achieve - the notion of communicative competence. It is also fair to say that Japanese teaching and learning contexts do not effectively teach communicative competence, as they view language ability in slightly different (though equally valid) terms. The Ministry for Education in Japan seeks to promote oral communication and encourages experimentation with new pedagogies. Therefore, it seems sensible to adopt a more pragmatic approach to the provision of a speaking skills course to Japanese high school students. This pragmatic approach might include an even mix of Direct and Indirect approaches that are tailored to suit the Japanese learning environment. This is of course only one potential solution, there may be other options (although this would be the subject of further research).

Specific examples of tailoring CLT/TBLT activities to the Japanese learning environment would be (though this list is by no means exhaustive): -

- Problem solving tasks might include a number of pre-determined solutions. This increased scaffolding helps to funnel students along 'correct paths' of learning making them feel more secure and helping to maintain class harmony.
- Tasks involving negotiation of meaning might be modified thus: assign students a role/character allowing them to voice their own opinion more freely; senior or dominant students can be assigned to managerial roles allowing all class members to contribute to discussions; incorporating vocabulary review or other more 'explicit' learning goals into the task so students feel there is a reason for the

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task.

- Presentations/reports might sometimes be video taped instead of being completed 'live' in class. The language used should remain the same but affords Japanese students more freedom of expression. Rather than launching straight into solo/group to class presentations, courses might begin by having students give group to group presentations so students can share pressure and build up class consensus on a topic. Presentation phases might sometimes be replaced entirely by 'genuine action' phases in which students repeat the task but in an authentic communicative situation (e.g. in a lesson on small talk functions/structures students might be asked to skype or message penpals).



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